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Article

Tracing the Landscape: Re-Enchantment, Play, and Spirituality in Parkour

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Abstract: Parkour, along with “free-running”, is a relatively new but increasingly ubiquitous sport with possibilities for new configurations of ecology and spirituality in global urban contexts. Parkour differs significantly from traditional sports in its use of existing urban topography including walls, fences, and rooftops as an obstacle course/playground to be creatively navigated. Both parkour and “free-running”, in their haptic, intuitive exploration of the environment retrieve an enchanted notion of place with analogues in the religious language of pilgrimage. The parkour practitioner or *traceur/traceuse* exemplifies what Michael Atkinson terms “human reclamation”—a reclaiming of the body in space, and of the urban environment itself—which can be seen as a form of playful, creative spirituality based on “aligning the mind, body, and spirit within the environmental spaces at hand”. This study will subsequently examine parkour at the intersection of spirituality, phenomenology, and ecology in three ways: (1) As a returning of sport to a more “enchanted” ecological consciousness through *poiesis* and touch; (2) a recovery of the lost “play-element” in sport (Huizinga); and (3) a recovery of the human body attuned to our evolutionary past.

Keywords: parkour; free-running; religion; pilgrimage; poiesis; ecology; urban

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the sport known as parkour has become a global phenomenon, with groups of practitioners or *traceurs* emerging from Paris to Singapore. Recent world championship competitions have been held in Turkey, Brazil, and the U.S.A., featuring athletes from locations as varied as Russia, Greece, Portugal, France, Germany, and England. There is even an active parkour squad in Gaza, practicing their art in buildings destroyed by armed conflict.¹ Jeffrey Kidder has written of the “global ethnoscape” of parkour, which captures something of the ethos of this subculture; *traceurs* and *traceuses* from around the world have become connected via YouTube and other social media, sharing videos of difficult techniques and innovative movements, creating a global community which inhabits a kind of boundless, virtual meta-city (Kidder 2017, p. 48).

Although parkour and its close cousin “free-running” are relatively new phenomena, they have already prompted theorists to conceptualize a range of new approaches to human mobility and the ontology of the globalized city. Both parkour and free-running differ significantly from traditional sports in their use of existing urban topography including walls, fences, stairwells, rooftops as an obstacle course/playground to be creatively navigated. There are also lively debates as to whether parkour can be classified as a sport, as it actively discourages competition (Bardwell 2010, p. 22); instead, parkour in its purest form purports to simply be about the ability to move efficiently through a given environment.

¹ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Q8rYz3T1-8>.

Alongside discussions of the political and social dimensions of space and movement, are there resources from the academic study of religion that could be brought to bear on the study of parkour? In his ethnographic study, Michael Atkinson comes to define parkour as “a mode of bringing forth or revealing dimensions of the physical and spiritual self through a particular type of urban gymnastics” (Atkinson 2009, p. 169). In its haptic, intuitive exploration of the urban environment, it is not fanciful to suggest that parkour not only undertakes a kind of creative refashioning of the individual’s relationship to the cityscape, but involves the city itself in a process of *poesis*, as several theorists have described it, full of spiritual meaning. Such an approach can be contrasted to the “disenchanted” landscape associated with the rise of modern capitalism; parkour provides an alternative mode of engagement with spaces shaped by the grid-like imaginaries of late modern capitalism, by rehabilitating an “enchanted notion of place which, through wonderment, imagination and participation, is in continuous composition” (Saville 2008, p. 892). In Atkinson’s terminology, the parkour practitioner or *traceur/traceuse* is interested in “human reclamation”—a reclaiming of the body in space, and of the cityscape itself—which can be seen as a form of playful, creative spirituality based on “aligning the mind, body, and spirit within the environmental spaces at hand” (Atkinson 2009, p. 169).

This study will examine this aligning, reclaiming, and “re-enchanting” aspect of parkour and free-running at the intersection of spirituality and ecology in three ways. First, it will be examined as a returning of sport to a more enchanted ecological consciousness through *poesis* and touch, in connection with a notion of the *traceur* as a kind of urban pilgrim. Secondly, parkour is posited as a recovery of the lost “play-element” in sport, drawing on the work of Johann Huizinga. Finally, with the first two approaches in mind, the sport is investigated as a recovery of the human body in its natural environment attuned to our deep evolutionary past.

Though still comparatively new, the scholarly literature on parkour has ably situated it in reference to the organization of space in capitalist societies; transnational politics; constructions of the virtual; as well as in relation to Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of “flow” (for an overview, see Csikszentmihalyi 1990, pp. 6–11; Kidder 2017, p. 57). This study hopes to provide new theoretical avenues for considering parkour by introducing terms and models from the study of religion. It is hoped that such crossdisciplinary exchanges will aid, rather than hinder, further contextual study of the social roles of parkour in the global city.

2. History and Core Values

There are unquestionably quasi-religious values which have accompanied the sport of *le parkour* ever since it was first developed in the 1990s by David Belle in France. It is sometimes described as *l’art du déplacement*—a phrase which helps underline its simultaneous existence as a sport, an art, and a rigorous discipline. At times the movement can resemble a religious order. For example, reading the philosophical “Charta” of the parkourONE group, published in 2014 by an influential contingent of traceurs in Germany and Switzerland, one encounters doctrinal statements which clearly promote a particular version of orthodoxy, establishing the squad within a particular interpretive tradition. With small modifications, such a manifesto could just as easily describe a restorationist religious ideology:

“Thus, we perceive ourselves as bearer of a specific idea; Parkour cannot be redefined randomly but rather has its own (even conceptual) history. We distinctly declare: David Belle is a living person; as such he and his perception, likewise, will change. We follow David’s original idea, however, not him as a “Guru”, leader or the like”.²

For the parkourONE group, it is the core ideas of parkour, not Belle himself, which are at the center of their practice. The five “fingers” or guiding principles listed on the parkourONE Charta, which correspond to the five pillars of parkour as generally accepted by the global community, are

² Available from https://parkourone.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/20160305_Charta_english.pdf.

non-competition, caution, respect, trust, and modesty. Such values, along with slogans such as “être et durer” (to be and to live on) and “être fort pour être utile” (being strong to be useful), are ethical norms which bind the parkour community together. These slogans also go back to the earliest roots of the sport in Georges Hébert (1875–1957) and his *méthode naturelle*, which is frequently cited as a precursor to parkour. “Hébertisme” emerged after the First World War in France as a new mode of physical exercise to train soldiers. In Hébert’s system, individuals who practiced the Natural Method, consisting of running, jumping, lifting, climbing, and balancing in ways that mirrored these movements as one might undertake them in simply navigating the natural environment, would develop not only physically but morally (see Atkinson 2009, pp. 171–72). The mantra of “être fort pour être utile” was, for Hébert, a way of reconnecting exercise to lived experience, embedded in nature and daily life. In his view, influenced by his experience abroad in the military, a return to a more natural method of physical activity was a return to an idealized past condition, one he romantically (and problematically) believed to be the way people still lived in Africa (Marshall 2010, p. 167):

“The man in the state of nature, forced to lead an active life to support himself, realizes a full physical development by doing only useful and natural exercises and executing the most common physical labor”. (Hébert 1912, p. 8)

Instead, for those in cities, this state of nature had been lost through the sin of sedentary existence:

“In civilized countries, social obligations, conventions and prejudices move man away from the natural life outdoors and often prevent the exercise of his activity. His physical development is slowed or halted by these obligations or conventions”. (Hébert 1912, p. 8)

Hébert’s insights were taken up by the French army, and the style of exercise he developed was used widely in post-WWI France. It was here that Raymond Belle, David Belle’s father, first trained in *parcours de combattant*, the obstacle-course fitness program that his son would eventually adapt for urban contexts.

Alongside this focus on the ethical path and the implicit valuing of a “way of nature”, another religiously-tinged moment in the history of parkour follows the narrative of David Belle himself, who founded the sport in the early 1990s. If Belle is the prophet of this new method, originating *le parkour* in its purest form while self-consciously situating it in reference to the story of his father, his follower, Sébastien Foucan, goes on to found another variant sect (“free-running”)—a classic story of divergence and succession with analogues with the formation of any religious denomination. Belle was worried about the “commercialization of parkour” (Bardwell 2010, p. 23), and believed that any creative expressions—choices of movement made for purely aesthetic reasons, such as impressive backflips and gymnastics influenced by *capoeira* or hip hop—are contrary to the spirit of parkour which must be about moving between points as efficiently as possible. This Great Schism is a foundational moment in the spiritual history of parkour and is frequently returned to in its texts.

Sébastien Foucan, who through his involvement with the Yamakasi squad subsequently helped develop “free-running” as a parallel, but more syncretic/synthetic blend of styles of movement, also speaks in more explicitly spiritual terms about the discipline:

There is a link between everything, like in [the teachings of] martial arts, it’s about energy and how we are all connected. Everything we do affects other people negatively or positively. I say, ‘your life is a road, your feelings a guide, your body a vehicle’’. [. . .] “Other people’s journeys can influence my own journey—this is my teaching”. (El-hage 2011, para. 7)

This moral pursuit of connection and energy through the beauty of free-running takes on ascetic dimensions, not unlike the stories of Mahavira from the Jain tradition; there are stories that the Yamakasi members would train without food and water and sleep without blankets in order to learn how to endure.

3. Parkour and Pilgrimage

In one of the seminal videos of early parkour, the trailer *Rush Hour* (2002), David Belle sits at a stereotypical desk, working at what we presume is a typical 9-to-5 job. Suddenly, he stands up, and removes his shirt, then steps out the window to gracefully assume the position of a handstand on the edge of the building. It is a moment of enlightenment and liberation, breaking free from the ordinary. He begins his journey over the rooftops of Paris, and his seamless, seemingly unearthly motion off of walls and between buildings is intercut with images of the traffic jam on the street below. Unconcerned with the activities of mere mortals, Belle has visually become an enlightened being who has transcended the “grid” of the 9-to-5 world—the world of traffic, busyness, and ugliness—and instead been raised to a new consciousness.

Such a comparison underlines the roots of the spirituality of parkour in both Eastern and Western paradigms. In writings on the subject, where parkour and free-running are defined as the “art of movement”, the overcoming of obstacles in the “most quick, efficient, and flowing way” is seen to entail not only agility but “prudence, awareness, control, and cool-headedness” (Bardwell 2010, p. 23). Such sapiential qualities, in line with Stoic self-control, the Buddhist middle way, or the Daoist way of nature seem more like virtues than purely athletic skills.

“A lot of different religions have a word for this. [...] The Hindus call it moksha. The Zen Buddhists call it a state of Zen awareness. [...] When you are engaged in parkour [...] you are envisioning your route. Everything else goes quiet for a moment. You feel the wind on your face. You feel the sweat dripping down your body. You feel muscles in your body moving, and in that moment, you are completely aware of your environment”. (a young traceur named ‘Eric’, quoted by Kidder 2017, p. 57)

This experience of total awareness of what is going on in the present is notably similar to *Vipassana* or mindfulness meditation, where each experience is deeply felt as it rises and passes—a simultaneous privileging of immediacy and of the transience of the moment. Theorists have highlighted the distinctively “serene ethos” of parkour, which Mould connects to Eastern philosophies, as a kind of “passive rediscovery” of the world (Mould 2009, p. 740). This rediscovery is both meditative and creative; the attentive eye of the traceur/traceuse looks for paths through the city, and through tactile, kinetic engagement with its surfaces (concrete, wood, metal) transforms the complex geography of each city block into something which can be moved through with ease. A “Kong Vault”, for example, transforms any obstacle into a kind of ad hoc touchdown point for a body moving at high speed, the arms thrusting the body forward in space; walls are mounted easily using “cat leaps” and “wall runs”, each relying on momentum, precision, and fluidity of movement. Mould describes the way that Belle’s movement “reappropriates the urban built environment from a striated space to a more fluid smooth space” (Mould 2009, p. 741), a kind of “gliding” through the solid textures of the city which reconfigures it into something new. The goal of the traceur within this urban ecology is to learn technique so well that individual movements are gradually integrated into constant motion—a smoothing out of form and a seamless integration of body and built environment.

This smoothing out through physical engagement is at the core of parkour as a journey (*parcours*) of re-enchantment. Many efforts have been made to link the “renegotiation of the environment” (Marshall 2010, p. 165) accomplished by parkour to its most obvious historical and conceptual predecessors: The Situationist *dérive* and the Benjaminian *flâneur* (Marshall 2010, p. 166; Atkinson 2009, p. 174). Yet another literary figure also comes to mind, one with a more explicitly religious meaning: The pilgrim, whose wanderings through space are oriented by a higher plane of consciousness.

What is a pilgrim? Most iterations in the major world religions are focused on travel to a particular sacred space, marked off for this purpose: The Ka’aba in Mecca, the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela on the edge of Spain, or the confluence of three rivers during the Kumbh Mela festival in India. Yet there is also a strong tradition of pilgrimage as peregrination—“wandering” without a particular destination in mind. Here one might draw on the “white martyrdom” of the Irish saints,

the itinerant lifestyle of a mendicant friar, or the Tendai Buddhist monks of Mt. Hiei (the so-called “marathon monks”) who prayerfully circumambulate a forest path around the mountain which takes years to traverse. In both cases, the wandering pilgrim is a figure on the margins, or in Victor and Edith Turner’s terminology in a “liminal” space, freed from “profane structures” and instead immersed into the *communitas* of fellow wanderers (Turner and Turner 1978, p. 9). The pilgrim can only re-integrate into society after a symbolic transformation, which in turn transforms them into a living icon of the whole “redemptive tradition” (Turner and Turner 1978, p. 10). In other words, pilgrimage is a deeply embodied mode of spirituality, wherein the body becomes, through engagement with the landscape, a site of religious *poeisis* or meaning-making.

In an important essay, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman helpfully distinguishes between the “pilgrim” and the “tourist”. While the tourist perceives only “fragmentariness and discontinuity, narrowness of focus and purpose, shallowness of contact” in relation to space, the itinerary of a pilgrim is a kind of deep experience of place, invested with spiritual meaning on each step of the journey.

“Pilgrims had a stake in solidity of the world they walked; in a kind of world in which one can tell life as a continuous story, a ‘sense-making’ story, such a story as makes each event the effect of the event before and the cause of the event after, each age a station on the road pointing towards fulfilment”. (Bauman 1996, p. 22)

For Bauman, the postmodern subject is a tourist, without a stable identity or sense of a destination—what exists instead is “life-as-strolling” (not unlike the *flâneur*) concerned only with the superficial aspects of the environment. Yet as Ivo Jer Asek points out, bringing the tourist/pilgrim discussion into conversation with the study of sport, there is a continuum of experience from “tourism to pilgrimage” and thus also of profane and sacred (Asek 2011, p. 223). Tourists may become pilgrims. What distinguishes between the two is not that they both aim to “visit and see” but that only the pilgrim continues on to “inspiration, feeling and deep experiencing” (Asek 2011, p. 231).

Within urban spaces disenchanted by social and economic distensions, parkour and free-running help “re-enchant” the landscape through pure, intense movement: in “deep experience” of urban topography, a kind of free-form peregrination over, under, and around walls, rooftops, and fences. Through physical exertion, the city itself is transformed into a pilgrimage “route” (*parcours*), circuitous and deeply intuitive, where each obstacle touched is a kind of sacred waypost. Perhaps the model of the traceur as postmodern pilgrim helps support the claim that in parkour one experiences “landscape and body as contingent, dynamic entities whose entanglement continuously blurs and (re)assembles body-landscape boundaries” (Bin Loo and Bunnell 2018, p. 148). The peregrinations of the traceur map out levels of meaning on the city which are both “symbolic and material”, not unlike the mantras of a Buddhist monk or a medieval Christian pilgrim. Both pilgrimage, broadly considered, and parkour inhabit liminal social spaces where new ways of movement are superimposed onto the landscape—a process of creative mythmaking or *poeisis*, undertaken within the *communitas* of a subaltern community of athletes. Attention to this creative, communal aspect of the sport is crucial to understanding its connection to spirituality.

4. Parkour and Play

A second approach to the question of how the vocabulary of the study of religion can inform understanding of parkour and free-running is the concept of “play”. Here it is important not to lose sight of the bigger picture. Paula Geyh has argued persuasively that an over-focus on the individual elements of parkour (particular jumps, flips, and vaults, etc.) leads away from what she terms a “poetics” of the sport: “the ways in which parkour can be seen to ‘remap’ urban space and to demonstrate a resistance to its disciplinary functions” (Geyh 2006, para. 5). By liquefying the enforced space of the grid, parkour is engaged in “creating a parallel, ‘ludic’ city, a city of movement and free play within and against the city of obstacles and inhibitions” (Geyh 2006, para. 10). Mould similarly calls into question the common notion of parkour as inherently subversive—seeking to “corrupt”

urban spaces, perhaps like graffiti or trespassing—and instead points out its creative embrace of the city as “playground” (Mould 2009, p. 743; Ameen and Tani 2012, p. 18).

One of the most influential discussions of “play” is the now-classic *Homo Ludens* by Johann Huizinga. Huizinga describes the “play-element” as a formative aspect of human culture. Although he seems more interested in games than in physically demanding sports, his insights have direct relevance as they seek to demarcate the boundary between the ordinary and what is specially marked out for “play”. For Huizinga, play is closely related to the imagination, and to the arts—it is a species of “significant form” not unlike a painting or a theatrical performance (a “play” in the proper sense), which imbues a particular constellation of actions and spaces with meaning.

Huizinga’s description of play can be summarized under a few headings. First, play is a voluntary activity, marked by freedom; one cannot be compelled to play, and this provisional nature means that the game can be stopped at any time (Huizinga 1949, p. 8). Second, and here again the analogy with the arts comes to the fore, play exhibits a kind of relative “disinterestedness” in that it does not directly satisfy individual or social wants and desires (Huizinga 1949, p. 9). The game, with its “pretend” rules and suspension of ordinary life, is autotelic and self-sufficient; whatever desires are fulfilled are done so obliquely. Third, play satisfies “communal and individual ideals”:

“[Play] adorns life, amplifies it and is to that extent a necessity both for the individual—as a life function—and for society by reason of the meaning it contains, its significance, its expressive value, its spiritual associations . . . ”. (Huizinga 1949, p. 11)

For this reason Huizinga also emphasizes play as “symbolical actualization”—not just a trivial activity, but like a mating dance or a religious ritual a solemn event of representation whereby “something invisible and inactual takes beautiful, actual, holy form” (Huizinga 1949, p. 14–15).³ He thus draws attention to the inside/outside dichotomy which is instantiated in the game—the inner “circle” of the game, which spatially could entail the football field, the sumo ring, the golf course—is all that matters. The players, like priests or cosplayers, are set apart to form a social “circle” as well, there are players, and there are spectators, and this sacred line cannot be breached.

Huizinga’s approach, then, draws significantly on the idea of demarcation—the way play is secluded or “limited” from ordinary/profane life. Both space and time are implicated in this seclusion. The game occurs within a limited time-frame: It is “played out” within a particular duration of time set aside for this purpose (whether a few hours for a basketball game, or several days for a cricket test match). It also occurs in a (de)limited space—a playing-ground marked off beforehand in some way. Within this spatial-temporal nexus, order is created: A “temporary, limited perfection” with its own aesthetic qualities which must not be deviated from (e.g., by a failure to follow the rules or by external events impinging on the performance of “the game”)—it has its own code of law, manifesting the triumph of order over chaos, which translates in religious terms to holiness. Huizinga thus concludes, “formally speaking, there is no distinction whatever between marking out a space for a sacred purpose and marking it out for the purposes of sheer play” (Huizinga 1949, p. 20). Religious ritual is itself a form of play, both equally “serious” and “pointless” (Huizinga 1949, p. 19)—and so culture itself is formed at its deepest level by the ludic or “play-element”.

How can this definition help inform study of parkour, particularly with reference to emergent concepts of spirituality? If play is the basis of ritual, parkour is itself a kind of ritual enactment of the very roots of culture. Michael Novak captures some of the spiritual significance of play within culture, suggesting that it upends traditional understandings of how the capitalist enterprise is related to the domain of spirituality:

³ Here Huizinga is careful to link “representation” not just to *mimesis*, but to *methexis* or participation—where the ritual is not “merely imitative” but is “actually reproduced”.

“Play, not work, is the end of life. To participate in the rites of play is to dwell in the Kingdom of Ends. To participate in work, career, and the making of history is to labor in the Kingdom of Means . . . In a Protestant culture, as in Marxist cultures, work is serious, important, adult. Its essential insignificance is overlooked. Work, of course, must be done. However, we should be wise enough to distinguish necessity from reality. Play is reality. Work is diversion and escape”. (Novak 1993, p. 170)

Although parkour and free-running are disciplines, as in the *Rush Hour* video they both go against the grain of the capitalist geography of “work” in their playful gliding through the grid-space. Play is construed as re-creation: The shaping of the urban environment through haptic poesis. In Huizinga’s terms, play itself becomes a kind of symbolic actualization, a meaning-making activity that transmutes one form into another.

What is most striking about Huizinga’s approach to play is its emphasis on setting aside a dedicated time and space to the play-activity. Returning briefly to his underlying image of the work of art, we might say that this model echoes the modernist understanding of the painting as the autonomous, self-possessed phenomenon which governs the terms by which it may be beheld—the “sacred” space of the art gallery set apart for this ritual purpose. This model of aesthetic experience has been called into question both for the way it characterizes art as a solitary, abstracted experience but also because it conceives of art in only one particular way—*l’art pour l’art*, removed from any real-world concerns. Movements such as relational aesthetics, or Hal Foster’s championing of the anti-aesthetic, are an attempt to think of art in non-modernist terms where its communal, embodied, and cultural aspects are not siphoned off but form precisely the hermeneutical matrix within which art makes meaning.

So too “play” can be considered in a non-autonomous, less hermetically isolated way. Any tendency to separate out the sacred and the secular, or for that matter the privileged domain of the “aesthetic” over against the ordinary, is precisely what is called into question by emergent practices such as parkour and free-running. Instead of occurring within a stadium, or even on a field dedicated to this purpose, “play” happens in and on the urban environment itself. For this reason, we might think of parkour’s reconfiguration of space as essentially secular—although it might rely on an “enchanted” paradigm of the city, it is not confined to (culturally) “sacred” spaces like the stadium, gallery, or church. This is not to say that Huizinga’s thought is itself focused only on the large scenario of the baseball stadium. By sacred space, he may mean something as small as the implicit and invisible boundaries of a children’s game. What parkour seems to do, however, is open up the closed “circle” of the game to encompass the whole city.

This “secularization” of play, and its implications for spirituality, is mirrored by other cultural developments around sport which similarly transform the city into a site of play. For example, the charity marathons which regularly shut down highways and major thoroughfares in North American cities are another example of sport breaking the boundaries of dedicated space in order to create a sense of the embeddedness of sport in “ordinary” topologies. Similarly, augmented-reality video games such as Pokémon GO and Ingress evince a kind of transformation of the world into a game-space, and a democratization (though still technologically moderated) of who gets to be a “player”. Though the inside/outside divide identified by Huizinga seems to persist—one is either “in” the game, immersed in a virtual world, or “out” in the real world—what is flattened out is the sense of the play-space as ritually distinguished from the profane.

Fragoso and Reis, in their research on location-based or “locative games” (Fragoso and Reis 2016, p. 132), invoke Huizinga’s account of games and play in order to speak of what they term “ludic re-enchantment” wherever the urban environment is appropriated for play. What they have in mind are role-playing games where the player inhabits a fictional universe anchored in the “materialities of ordinary life” (135), but this term is equally applicable to parkour and free-running. Unlike the video game players cited by Fragoso and Reis 2016, however, the parkour athlete does not re-enchant space through social relationships or a fictional narrative; instead, parkour creates meaning through

movement, in creative, adaptive, haptic encounter with the textures of the landscape. Poiesis, in this context, becomes not a matter of “simultaneous experience of fictional and real spaces” as in location-based gaming, but rather emerges out of the embodied experience of reconfiguring space. There is no alternate reality; rather, the physical world is transmuted into a “route”, full of potential and spiritual energy—what matters is complete awareness and immediacy, a physically embodied ritual of sense-making. The whole city becomes a secular venue for such “ludic re-enchantment”.

This shift towards a more secular iteration of play may simply echo institutional changes underway in society. Like religion and the arts, sport and play more generally is undergoing its own cultural shift out of traditional times and spaces to something less “holy”. The unholiness of parkour extends this tendency in multiple ways. The special vestments which distinguish athletes from laypeople are gone; instead, the dress called for is ordinary, a kind of ascetic purity. There are no dedicated spaces for parkour, aside from the occasional sparsely furnished training “gym”—instead, as with other urban sports like skateboarding and even basketball, existing elements of urban architecture must be repurposed to become ramps and obstacles.

This does not necessarily mean that parkour and free-running represent a more pure or primitive form of athleticism. This is at stake in the debate between the more “purist” practitioners of the Natural Method and the gradual commercial adoption of free-running as a more performative, less “practical” style. The reasons for this are ideological. For the Belle school, parkour is resolutely focused on moving from one point to another in the most efficient way possible, displacing the body without attention to style. On the other hand, disciples of Foucan maintain that style and gymnastic flourishes are germane to the sport. Yet internationally, it seems that these two styles have re-integrated, so that parkour is essentially a blend of the two—a form of free, uninhibited play which is broadly consistent with Huizinga’s quasi-religious phenomenology of play as “symbolic actualization”.

5. Re-Enchantment and Human Evolution

One final core doctrine of the parkour ethos is built on a particular understanding of the history of the human body. Reading manifestos by practitioners, one frequently encounters the idea that exercise as practiced in contemporary Western society is unnatural in its repetitive, artificial techniques and subsequently has deleterious effects on the body. Activities focused on developing particular muscles in isolation, such as lifting weights, jogging on a treadmill, and other technologies for personal fitness are characterized as “a very recent phenomenon in human evolution”. Traceur Dan Edwardes suggests in an article for the UK-based parkour training school PKGen that movement for fitness should be natural, adaptive, and variable, more akin to the way humans have naturally moved through environments for millennia. In other words, rather than consigning us to the artificial rhythms of the gym, physical exertion ought to connect us to a more “human” way of moving, “which from an evolutionary standpoint means covering terrain and getting over obstacles regularly” (Edwardes 2018). Parkour is thus construed as retrieving an older, more organic way of moving and exercising than any modern program of weights and machinery.

It is undeniable that jumping, vaulting, and especially running—particularly over long distances—are capabilities with origins deep in humanity’s evolutionary past. Although one might be tempted to compare the agility on display in parkour and free-running to the movements of animals, including our simian cousins, there are ways to speak of a distinctively “human way of moving”. In particular, a prehistoric account might trace these movements back to the emergent “striding bipedalism” of the genus *Homo*, which gives rise to fast running speeds over long distances unlike those of any other primates (Bramble and Lieberman 2004). The ability to run quickly may stretch as far back as *Homo australopithecus*, who lived between approximately 2–4 million years ago. Such endurance running may be one of the primary shaping factors of the modern human form, explaining the physiological divergence of modern humans from earlier ancestors. Moreover, since running played a role in the ability of prehistoric hominids to chase down prey, it may have been one of the

most important factors which allowed humans to find an ecological niche and eventually grow to become the dominant species on the planet (Carrier et al. 1984).

“Free running” is thus perhaps at the very core of what it means to belong to the human race, both physiologically and panhistorically. Although it is difficult to substantiate the claim that the fluid, gymnastic movements of parkour approximate those undertaken by our earliest ancestors, and we ought to be wary of the colonial primitivism of the *méthode naturelle* from which parkour is derived, clearly there is for traceurs a connection between rapid movement and the primal experience of the human being. Yet although moving between points as quickly and efficiently as possible, the stated aim of parkour, may emerge out of evolutionary necessity, it paradoxically becomes a modality of “ludic re-enchantment” in the late modern landscape. To run freely, smoothly, and playfully through the urban environment is to in a sense retrieve an earlier mode of “deep experience”, situating oneself in an ancient confluence of physical exertion and aesthetic sensation. In Atkinson’s terminology, parkour involves a kind of re-alignment of body and environment, the physical and the spiritual. Moving across terrain and over obstacles becomes not ‘just’ a game, still less just a fitness program, but (again, with a nod to Huizinga) participation in an essentially human ritual action.

Of critical importance in terms of re-enchantment is the role of the community of traceurs/traceuses in transforming space together. It is the shared experience of movement and beauty, rather than the individual’s connection to the environment alone, that invests each *parcours* through the city with symbolic meaning. It is together, whether locally or within the larger context of a virtual meta-city, that traceurs transform the secular spaces of the “grid” into new, fecund pilgrimages.

6. Conclusions

A constructive way forward for understanding the relationship between parkour and spirituality might focus on ecology. In Bauman’s essay on the tourist and the pilgrim, he notes that we now inhabit a world “inhospitable to pilgrims” (Bauman 1996, p. 23) where the need to build identity (particularly to leave “traces” behind) leads to the barrenness of a figurative desert. The process of identity-formation, so key to the figure of the pilgrim, has become obsolete. Perhaps parkour, with its emphasis on embodied experience of the landscape, can help transform this desert into an oasis. An “enchanted” view of not only nature, but the urban landscape itself as full of potential for beauty and grace, could perhaps be the basis for a renewed ecological consciousness. This is certainly at the core of Atkinson’s approach, who draws a comparison between parkour and the tradition of environmental transcendentalism to be found in Thoreau (Atkinson 2009, pp. 175–76). Parkour thus becomes “the art of revealing or bringing forth possibilities of the alternatively environmental self/society” (Atkinson 2009, p. 178). In other words, the trope of the city “smoothed out” by creative movement is bound up with a return to nature, particularly in our own era of climate change and the degradation of urban spaces. To give just one example, cities such as Toronto and Chicago are facing major problems related to flooding because the concrete out of which cities are built cannot absorb water like porous grass or forest land. Tracing a new path for water in the topology of the built environment is a kind of cultural analogue for parkour and free-running: Moving over and around obstacles efficiently and even gracefully.

Atkinson’s ecologically-inflected model of the spirituality of parkour draws on the idea of “reclamation”, and indeed this is an illuminating term. For the body itself, the roots of the sport in the *méthode naturelle* seem to ground the types of movements developed by parkour in the ancient history of humanity—a prehistory of human bodies before the rise of cities. In Huizinga’s terminology, parkour brings to the foreground the ancient ludic element to human society, reminding us that all cultural activity—including religion—is suffused with “play”. Though there is an aspect of romanticization here, it seems clear that a plurality of ways of moving and a recovery of play may indeed activate older, more primal modes of human mobility which need to be adapted within the new context of global cities. If there is a spirituality that lends itself to ecology, surely it is one which retrieves the embedded, embodied, playful nature of the human body in kinetic, tactile connection with its environment. Here

the core parkour values of non-competition, caution, respect, trust, and humility can be understood as ecological imperatives as well; “être et durer” and “être fort pour être utile” are both individual virtues and spiritual values for the good of humanity.

This brief survey of how concepts of religion and spirituality can be used to explore the possibilities of body and environment in parkour suggests, then, that there are new paths to “trace” in considering the intersection of lived urban experience and the sacred/secular binary. In particular, there are ample reasons to “read” this emergent art/sport/discipline as a resource for ecologically-minded forms of spirituality which reclaim the human body and the city itself for symbolic, ludic ends.

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